

Memories of Robert Lax

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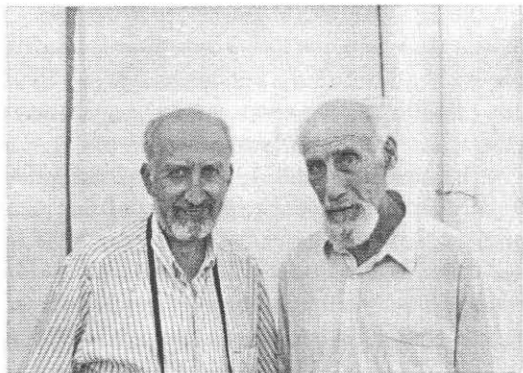
It's like a bird of the marshes that a spirit flies.

– Robert Lax

The friendship between Robert Lax and Moschos Lagouvardos is one of the longest and closest of any that Lax had in Greece. The two met when Bob was first living on the island of Kalymnos, before he had moved to Patmos. Moschos had come to the island in 1968 and stayed for four years working in the judicial system. After Bob moved to Patmos, Moschos visited him there every year and often would see him when Bob came to Athens for various reasons. Moschos has translated a number of the writings of Robert Lax into Greek, and his photographs of Lax have appeared in various publications. Moschos referred to Lax as Roberto, as did other Europeans. – Paul J. Spaeth

Roberto lived in an old house near the sea. He had not yet rented the house at the top of the hill at San Stefano yet. It was a damp, two-story house in a narrow street that led to the sea. From the balcony you could see a few other two-story houses, a vacant lot dotted with some trees (salt trees), and the coastal road with the sea on one side and the mountains of Kos rising on the other. Even though it was damp, the house was very nice and peaceful given that the narrow street had no traffic from vehicles.

During the winter months the street was flooded with water since it was continually sprayed by the waves. I can hardly recall that road ever being dry except during the summer, and then the salt that was left would eat away at the thresholds of the houses. In winter my socks were always as wet as my shoes, and that was because my shoes had holes in them. I did not care so much about the way my clothes were, but Roberto did not care about the way he dressed at all. He wore whatever his friends sent him. His unkemptness was part of his charm. He was attractive no matter what he wore. One winter he wore white shoes that were in stark contrast to the black of his trousers. Roberto was so simple, so sincere, so unaffected and real that we loved him even in his shabbiness. A friend of ours named Kostas Voyatzis drew a picture of him wearing a pair of huge, circus-like shoes. His shoes were his trademark.



Moschos Lagouvardos (l.) with Robert Lax

“Love everyone and all things,” he told me in his last phone call from Patmos, just a few months before his death. He always had a cheerful disposition for everyone, and a love in his soul even for inanimate things. In the beginning I wondered whether he saw the world as perfect. Maybe he only saw things as he wanted them to be. But then again he always said that we rely on that which is in this world; in other words, we rely on material reality.

He liked to travel. Even in his old age he took long trips, whether to visit friends, to attend to the publishing of his books, to be present at exhibitions of his works, or to read his poetry before an audience. Once or twice a year he went to Athens to renew his permit of temporary residency, or to have his teeth fixed at Doctor Kounelaki’s. While in Athens he would usually stay at the Veto Hotel, an old but clean hotel on Lykourgos Street just behind Omonia Square. The people of the hotel staff were his friends. Because they liked him so much they even treated me in a friendly way, always smiling and eager to inform me as to whether he was up in his room or not.

Roberto was like a migratory bird, traveling for the most part with only what was on his back. He had no possessions other than an old sack which contained the Psalms of David and the Book of Isaiah from the Bible, some underwear and shirts. The shirts were usually wrinkled, but they were clean. Sometimes, though, the clean would get mixed with what had been worn and the sack did not smell very nice. But that did not bother me since I was unkempt and careless with my clothes also. I had not learned to travel with the bare necessities, or rather I did not know exactly what the bare necessities for a trip were. Roberto had the things that the sack contained written down: toothbrush, toothpaste, underwear, socks, shirts and sweaters. He kept his copy of the Psalms at his bedside. His favorite line at the time was, “Let us sing new hymns to God.”

I was never bothered by Roberto’s dirty laundry or appearance because he seemed that idyllic to me. The most important thing in the world for Roberto was the beauty of God. Through him the beauty of the presence of God touched me to the core. It never mattered to him that he could not find somebody who thought as he did. He loved everyone as individuals in their own right, for their own uniqueness. It was natural for him to love beauty and wisdom in the same way.

He thought it was funny when he saw the things to which people were attached, and thought it was strange to see the prejudices they held. But he would do this without looking down on anybody. He saw God in everyone. He had a sense of understanding and felt sadness for the bad person. But a bad word never left his mouth about any human being, or even about any thing.

As far as Roberto’s day-to-day life is concerned, it was eventful. He always watched where he was walking because he was so clumsy. He often laughed at his clumsiness. He never did anything mechanically or absent-mindedly.

I liked it that Roberto was happy in whatever he did and wherever he was. He would never look for a reason to start an argument. He was at peace with himself. He had God’s Grace within him.

In the morning while in Athens, we would take our breakfast at a confectionary where yogurt with honey and warm milk, or fried eggs were on the menu. Roberto knew all the waiters. We usually sat at the table where a friend of his waited on us. Roberto knew where he was from, all about his family and other details about his life.

I was easily distracted by many things because I had not freed my mind as Roberto had. Only when one’s mind is free can thoughts be calm, bright and happy. “It is only when we are calm and we take things slowly that our vision grows.” He told me this on the phone a few months before his last trip to America. I had never heard Roberto speak with such emotion before. He spoke as if his breath had been taken away.

During the final years of his life he seemed to live like an old hermit, alone and far from his family on the other side of the world. It was only with great difficulty that he was able to climb the steps leading to the top of the hill where his house was situated. So he did not often go down to the harbor, as had been his usual routine, to meet his friends at the docks, to do his shopping, to go to the post-office, to see the fishing-boats from Kalymnos and speak to the fishermen, or to take a walk by the sea. That walk was, I believe, what he missed most. His only solace was his writing, his prayer-life and staring out to the sea. The ever-changing elements of the light and the sea breezes were what gave him life.

A neighbor would bring him food, and there were friends to help him. They helped with correspondence and transcribed his manuscripts onto a computer that had been given to him. He no longer would write his address on envelopes or postcards in that unique way of his. I was glad that he had found good people to help him. But what he thrived on was his walk by the sea and the contact he had with others from the island. He knew everyone by name. He asked them about their families. He would send something to those who were ill. He was sincerely friendly to everyone, and everyone in return showed the love they had for him. They sensed that for Roberto that island was his island, exactly as it was for them: their place, their native land. He would become as nostalgic as the islanders themselves when it came to talking about Patmos. When he went abroad, even for a short while, he would send me postcards telling me how homesick he was for the island.

The piece of clothing that suited him most was a blue sweater. I had once given him a beautiful blue sweater that looked good on him. In thanking me he told me that his friend Ed Rice, who was on Kalymnos at that time, liked it a lot. Rice had just finished writing a book on their mutual friend Thomas Merton and was planning to go on to India (or had just returned). On one of the last pages he had a lovely photo of Roberto looking out to sea; the caption read, "Robert Lax waited in Greece for Merton to finish his trip."

Roberto admired Ed Rice. Rice was as graceful in his movements as Roberto was clumsy. Roberto saw Rice as something of a craftsman. Whatever he handled, he did so with intensity: a person who would be good at anything he tried. I remember a time when the three of us were sitting together at the confectionery belonging to Roberto's friend Vouros. Roberto was talking about the problems he was having with his work during that particular period. I told them of the anxiety I felt when I climbed to the bench in order to try cases (still being a new judge at the time). Rice said, "Drink a little wine beforehand, and everything will be fine."

Although he lived alone, almost hermit-like, he was not isolated. He had in a sense left the world, but he did not stay in his house except when he was ill, or when he was writing. He could not stand being confined to one place. Maybe that was the reason he did not become a monk, but chose rather to be "a monk of the world." When he was not able to take walks or travel anymore he did not wish to live. This is what was told to me by his German artist friend Barbara [Ulmer] over the phone.

"I saw your friend, the poet, by chance on Patmos," my colleague told me happily after her pilgrimage to the island of Saint John. "It was he. It cannot have been anyone but he. I recognized the man from your descriptions. I saw this tall, upright person dressed in white coming from the sea by way of a small beach, wearing a straw hat and holding a long stick in his hand. He looked like an ancient prophet." That was he, I said to myself. "He was like a person from another world," continued my colleague. "I will never forget that scene if for no other reason than knowing the love and admiration you hold for your friend."

Roberto believed that it was impossible to remain calm and at peace if he did not keep his distance from women. He would tell me about how passion wanes as the years go by. He said that there is a story about an old ascetic that was asked by one of his followers where he wished to be taken. "Anywhere," answered the old man, "as long as there are no women there."

Roberto had all the virtues of a monk: celibacy, solitude and being oblivious to his own personal needs. Celibacy: with the hope of maintaining his faculties at peak condition without distractions and in so doing keeping his heart free from all impure longings. Solitude: through the myriad difficulties he suffered by living alone in a distant country. Being oblivious to his own personal needs: through his self-imposed poverty and physical deprivation, thus restricting himself to only the bare essentials and not clinging even to his few belongings.

We would often sit at the coffee shop by the harbor in silence, happy with the breezy light of the morning, with the freshness of the sea, with the air that seemed to be alive. Roberto would sit airily in his chair. He rested his hand in that characteristic way of his, the way that made his hands a poem. "Art," he says, "makes all things bright." Roberto was never less than serious in his moods or his movements. He was always on a spiritual high thanks to his purity of heart. Even though he had a slight case of clumsiness due to his being tall, he always stepped lightly. His inner world and his awareness endowed Roberto with an exquisite softness. He himself was that art which he had just talked about that afternoon. He touched the earth as if he were nothing more than a tender look.

He rarely sat for long in the coffee shop. He usually took walks along the pier. He never drank alcohol, nor did he drink coffee, and of course smoking was not even under discussion. I had asked him once if he had ever smoked and, if I remember correctly, he told me that he had when he was a university student. Roberto drank hot chocolate or mountain-tea (sage).

Once a confectioner had called us over to treat us to some ice cream. Because of his insistence I accepted so as not to insult him. I included Roberto as well, who was always wary of the Greeks' impulsiveness. But I realized my mistake when I put the first spoonful into my mouth. The ice cream was awful. It was not only that it tasted bad; we were afraid it might have actually gone bad. We both broke out in a cold sweat as we looked at the overfilled bowls. We dropped as much as we could between our legs. But the confectioner had sat between us and was watching us as we forced down most of the ice cream. Because of all this Roberto was in a sweat. His diet was something he was very careful about. Thankfully, we did not get sick. The ice cream had not gone bad; it simply did not taste good. In the end we laughed our heads off over that incident.

I would travel long distances to meet Roberto. I joyfully raced to Athens the moment he informed me that he was there. As I said, Roberto would stay at a hotel behind Omonia Square. During the day he used to leave his door slightly open. "Roberto," I would whisper from the hallway. "Yes, Moschos," he would answer in the humorous voice he had, "Come in. We are here." Our meetings in Athens were the same as the ones we had daily on Kalymnos years before. It was as if time had not gone by since then, as if we had been together only a few hours before and now we were to continue our conversation. The time that had gone by was of no consequence. The feeling of each other's presence was constant. "You are always here," he would write in his letters, even when he was in Marseilles or Teneriffe.

One day I showed him a photograph of Walt Whitman sitting in an armchair in the middle of a room that was awash in a sea of paper. He was very old, with a thick, snowy-white beard. His eyes were those of a desperate man. How could those eyes not be desperate when they looked over that

mountain of paper? In contrast Roberto loved his work area to be organized. "Put your table in order" was one of his operating principles. He had two large tables in his room in the house in San Stefano. The largest was usually covered with letters from friends. The other was covered with piles of smaller objects such as pencils, paper, paper clips, erasers, pencil sharpeners, sticky-tape, staplers, rubber-bands, etc. The table with his typewriter was at the other house on the road leading to Brosta which he had rented only with the intention of writing there.

I once told him that one night I woke up frightened because I was alone in my room. He replied that he also woke up scared that night, but scared that I was not alone! He always found a humorous answer for everything in the same way that circus clowns make you laugh by the things they do. Roberto knew very well my way of thinking, since I am a person who thinks out loud. So he was often able to make me laugh at his jokes. I feared being alone, whereas he enjoyed it. He was never bored when he was alone in his room. He usually prayed or wrote.

In Athens, where we had met for the last time in the spring of 1992, we stayed in the Minerva Hotel on Stadiou Street. The hotel was being cleaned and all the mattresses were in the hallway. Neither of us was in a good mood. Roberto was wearing a white hat, yellowed with wear, and a white summer jacket. It was the first time I had ever seen Roberto wearing something that didn't suit him at all. He had lost weight and his dark eyes had a strange gleam in them. That soft, golden light that radiated from Roberto was gone. That was the only time we experienced some unpleasantness while talking, the first time that I felt Roberto suffer. "Tell me something I do not know yet," he asked me despairingly. When I said that I thought that love was not all you need, and that all spiritual roads did not lead to salvation, he grew somewhat annoyed and distressed. He could not think of anything funny to take away the cloud that hung over our conversation. But Roberto was always polite and considerate. It did not help that it was mid-day and it was so hot in the hotel room that our clothes were stuck to our bodies.

Roberto loved the circus. The beauty of the circus was in the journey, in the constant, interchanging places, in the endless putting up and taking down of the big top. He loved the acrobats, the clowns, the lovely faces of the children with excitement in their eyes, and the music. The end of one performance is the beginning of another. Leaving one town behind leads to arriving in the next. The people in the audience are always concentrating all their strength on the wisdom and beauty of the performances. Roberto felt that the circus was a never-ending cycle founded on the strength that comes from wisdom, and the wisdom found in beauty, and the love of the soul in search of its beloved.

Roberto did not believe that there was any fundamental difference between the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Church. The only real difference that he could see was in who headed up the Church. This was not a position that I could fully agree with, although some people on the island tended to lean towards his way of thinking.

Friends of his would come from all corners of the world to visit him. Most were poets, writers, painters, or sculptors. There were people like his old friend Ed Rice, Jim Harford and his family, the English poet and publisher David Kilburn, the American poet John Landry, or Touna, a female poet from Tunisia. Once when Bengt Hagstrom from Sweden had come to visit, Roberto had to leave the island unexpectedly. Bengt was very sad at not having seen him. "He is like a father to me," he had said. Sometimes his American friend Jean would come to visit.

He had many friends. His correspondence was immense. It is worth commenting that he managed to answer the myriad of letters that he received. I sometimes helped him put his correspondence in order. I felt sorry for him being drowned in so many letters. On one such occasion we got many large envelopes from a photographer acquaintance of his, red envelopes made of thick cardboard. On the outside of the envelope we wrote the name of the friend he was writing to, and we would file the answered letters in there. The unanswered letters were left on a large table until Roberto could get around to them. There were over seventy such envelopes laid upright in a big, wooden trunk dressed with blue sheet-brass. Almost every day he would go to the post office in order to send a pile of letters and pick up another such pile.

Being aware of the amount of his correspondence, I begged him when I left not to write to me. But he sent me many, many letters, which I have saved in their envelopes as a beloved treasure. "Just write me a few lines instead of a long letter so that you do not get tired," I told him. But every one of Roberto's lines was expressive. He wrote every line conscientiously and he enjoyed doing so. His drawing went hand in hand with his writing. He wrote ever so slowly as if with his very soul. The ruling of each line, and the writing of every symbol of the alphabet was attached to deep, whole, cheerful breathing. That writing/drawing was something that kept him at peace both mentally and spiritually.

I knew that the sketches and drawings soothed him and that is why I asked him to send me letters composed of drawings that expressed feelings, instead of words and phrases. As for answering letters from friends, I told him to write some kind of newsletter that could be copied and sent to everyone. But he did not want that. I suggested that he should at least write letters as short as his poems.

Greeks love things that are small whereas large things are thought to be barbaric. Roberto adored the small. To produce that which is small and light-hearted was the rule of both his life and his art. The large, the heavy (especially something that had a somber mood) was something he loathed. Weight for him was like a great evil. "Art teaches us to live without burden," Roberto would often say. This lightness he thought to be an angelic characteristic. He saw life as a journey where the will of God would be done in the end. "Do what you can," he said, "and the rest is the work of angels."

Thomas Merton, his friend and brother, died the year Roberto was waiting for him to visit the island. But Roberto had many close friends. Even though Roberto never married, and so did not have a family of his own, the whole world was like a family to him. He cared for them all and he knew what it meant to love them all.

The dean at a college where he had once taught for a while had asked Roberto to change the way he graded. Roberto had given high marks to all his students, deeming their performance excellent in accordance with their abilities. He did not compare one student to another. He respected each person's individuality. He believed that there were no impartial criteria as far as judging people was concerned. In handing in his resignation Roberto had told the dean that he should change his thinking instead of asking that the marks be changed.

Roberto was an existentialist of sorts. He ignored theories and based all his thought and actions on the most vital of emotions. He would often quote the teachings of prophets or poets, but rarely would he mention philosophers except for Plato or the Fathers of the Church. He knew that he was not mistaken as far as his own self-worth went. He had dedicated his whole life to poetry. I believe that he did the same thing with life as he did with art. "Simply to continue writing," he would say,

“simply to continue living.” And through prayer he did so. The quality of his prayers was not dependent on himself. He was in search of pure prayer and a free mind.

Fishermen, divers, sailors, captains, acrobats, jugglers and musicians were his favorites. He saw elements and qualities which he admired in both the circus and the sea. But above all he loved quiet, order and sparseness – the bare essentials that could be found on any small fishing boat where everything was in its proper place. The fishermen all loved him, and he knew them all by their first names. He would occasionally go with them on excursions, even though some of these trips were somewhat dangerous.

“How is life in New York City?” Roberto’s father would ask him when he was studying there. “It’s like everyone’s in an orgy and they only care about you if you’re crazy.” “At your age, whichever city you lived in, you would feel the same,” replied his father.

I once received a card from Roberto from Teneriffe where he was staying at his friend Ramon’s farm in order to get a taste of country life. Roberto had never worked with his hands before; he had never done manual labor. And when he actually did try, what ensued was something that resembled the actions of a clown at the circus, or something from a Laurel and Hardy movie. Ramon had made him responsible for the care of a cow. Roberto wrote a postcard to me saying that he thought the cow was in danger.

Roberto loved the way Charlie Chaplin would change failure into success, and the way Buster Keaton would accept things as they are. Roberto would say that when something happens that defies understanding you should just shrug your shoulders and carry on.

Roberto maintained his peace, his certainty, his sense of humor and his zest for fun in a permanently troubled and weary world, because he had the gift of continually feeling the presence of God. There was no way you could humiliate him because he was so humble to begin with. I wonder if he ever felt alienation and doubt, if there were days in his life devoid of meaning. I believe that from his younger years he had a sense of his mission in life. Merton writes in his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* that he felt that Roberto was born with the deepest sense of who God was, and that he had a truer communication with the grace of God than Merton himself had. Roberto never seemed to wonder who he was, or where he was, or even what he was doing. He knew why he was alive, and his life had meaning.

When I left Kalymnos, he would go to the harbor before me. I would find him waiting for me at the pier. He would fill my pockets with biscuits and sweets. There was part of him that always acted like an affectionate mother. Whether it was cold, windy or raining, Roberto in his black overcoat and cap was at the pier. Sometimes wet, sometimes freezing, but always alone. He was always ready to sacrifice himself for his friends.

He suffered from arthritis. I believe he had chosen to live on Kalymnos because it had one of the driest climates of all the Greek islands. There is almost nothing green there. He had some type of iron deficiency. He also had problems with his teeth. But even when ill, he never took to his bed. He led a healthy lifestyle. He went to sleep early and rose early. He prayed, he exercised his body, he kept to a good diet, he took vitamins, and during the summer he swam for hours in the sea.

Roberto’s solitary lifestyle was not the result of isolation, because he loved to be with, and talk to people. But he needed to be alone for a good part of the day. That necessary silence was what he needed to write.

On the night I left Kalymnos for good, I said goodbye to the island that I had lived on for about four years. My life on Kalymnos was over. Even if I returned I would be nothing but a visitor. I was standing on one side of the deck staring through tearful eyes at the murky waters, the lights twinkling.

He was an angel, a beautiful bird which, when it stretches its wings and flies, you can see just how incredibly beautiful it really is. "He is the type of person about whom books will be written someday," said Catherine Doherty. The people who should be writing about Roberto are Giorgi, Rinio, Limnena, Maria, Calliope, Michael, Pantelis, Manolis, the Vouros family, Demitrios, Master Nicholas, the fishermen, the sailors, the divers, but none of them write.

Many years later, at the Planet Café, amidst the computers, I sit and write about my friend while drinking cappuccino. The act of writing is sweet. It makes no difference what happens to the writing, whether it is read or not read, whether it is published or not. At this time I feel happy writing because I am writing about Roberto – Roberto who left his friends and family to find a quiet place to write and pray, Roberto who introduced me to the spirit of Orthodoxy, Roberto through whom I saw the value of a simple life, composure, placidity, solitude and silence, along with the unspeakable joy of the continual repetition of the Name of God.